

Creation and Animals

David L. Clough

in A. J. Johnson (Ed.), *T&T Clark Companion to the Atonement* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), pp. 441–445

[p. 441]

Throughout the history of the church, theories of atonement have rarely been discussed with other-than-human creatures in mind. This is surprising, given the emphasis in some New Testament texts on the cosmic scope of the reconciliation effected in Jesus Christ. The first chapter of Colossians affirms that in Christ, God ‘was pleased to reconcile all things (*ta panta*), whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross’ (v. 20). Ephesians has a similarly broad view of the work of Christ, picturing ‘all things’ in heaven and earth being gathered up in in him (1.10). We seem, therefore, to be in need of an explanation of this lacuna in traditions of Christian atonement doctrine. Such an explanation does not seem to be far away: other New Testament texts state that Jesus Christ was ‘the atoning sacrifice for our sins’ (1 Jn. 2.2), ‘handed over handed over to death for our trespasses’ and ‘raised for our justification’ (Rom. 4.25). If these latter texts are correct and Jesus died for sins and trespasses, it seems to make little sense to say that he makes peace between things for which sins and trespasses have no relevance. Following this logic, theologians seem to have preferred to understand the Colossian and Ephesian ‘all things’ as hyperbolic, and to construe atonement as a human-specific event. There are reasons to think, however, that this settlement is unsatisfactory. In this essay, therefore, I will explore options for a more expansive view that attends more closely to the cosmic vision of Colossians and Ephesians.

Andrew Linzey suggests that there are three options for orthodox Christian belief in relation to non-human animals and the atonement: (1) ‘animals are not capable of sin or estrangement and therefore are not able to be included in the saving work of Christ’; (2) ‘if they have sinned or fallen from grace it may be possible for the Son of God to become

incarnate in their nature to in order to reconcile them' (Linzey, 99); (3) 'by becoming incarnate in one rational species,

[top of p. 442]

the Son of God has *ipso facto* become the redeemer of all' (Mascall, 107). If the first option or second option is correct, either non-human animals are not sinful or estranged and are not therefore in need of reconciliation, or they need a non-human incarnation for redemption. In either case, theories of atonement that treat humans exclusively are well-formulated:

atonement is human-specific because the problem to which it responds is human-specific.

Only if the third option is correct, that God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ is redemptive of all creatures, as the Christologies of Colossians and Ephesians suggest, do we need to rethink human-centred atonement theories.

One objection to the third option of extending the concept of atonement through the work of Jesus Christ to non-human creatures is that it is implausible to think that non-human creatures stand in need reconciliation. There are a range of ways of approaching this question, however, that indicate we need to think more broadly about the creatures for whom reconciliation is relevant. For example, the partners in the Genesis 9 covenant are repeatedly identified as Noah, his descendants, and 'every living creature' of 'all flesh' (vv. 10, 12, 15, 16, 17), and the later division between clean and unclean animals can plausibly be interpreted as between those that kept the covenant by eating the green plants specified for them in Genesis 1:30, and those that did not (Grumett and Muers, 73; Clough, 54-5). Transgressing or forgetting God's covenant representing the original ordering of things therefore seem modes of sin that are clearly applicable beyond the human realm. The covenant in Hosea also addresses non-human animals (Hos. 2.18). The judgement of God proclaimed by the prophets often falls humans and other animals together, in Jeremiah (7.20; 14.6; 21.6; 12.4), Ezekiel (14.13-21; 38.19-20), Joel (1.4-20; 2.4-7), Zephaniah (1.2-3), and Haggai (1.11). When

Jonah prophesies to Nineveh, the all humans and other animals fast and cover themselves with sackcloth (Jon. 3.7–8) and when God forgives Nineveh, God refers to non-human animals as well as humans to explain the decision to Jonah (Jon. 4.11). There is therefore a broad biblical basis for thinking of the need for reconciliation going beyond the human sphere.

Another reason to judge that human beings are unique in their need for reconciliation is that many other attributes formerly considered uniquely human have been shown in studies of non-human animals to be more broadly shared. Crows have been observed to fashion tools to solve problems; chimpanzees are capable of empathy, morality, and politics, and of outdoing humans in numerically based memory tests; dolphins interpret grammar; parrots understand abstract properties such of objects such as colour and shape; whales show cultural specificity in their behaviour and communication (see discussion in Clough, *On Animals I*, 29–30 [top of p. 443]

and 64–76). Given the overlap of many of these capacities with what we have understood as rationality, it is very difficult to advance a definition of rationality that distinguishes between human and non-human animals. Given this new knowledge of non-human animal capacities, it is unclear how we could retain a concept of wrong-doing and a consequent need for reconciliation that did not overlap in some way with at least some non-human animals. This general point is supported by specific examples, such as the account Jane Goodall gives of a history of the stealing and eating of infant chimpanzees by a particular female and her family, and the opposition and disgust manifested by other members of the troop (Goodall, 193-5, 206-7; Clough, 112-15).

While I judge that there is no good theological reason to restrict language of sin to human beings (Clough, 105–119), it may be that Linzey's reference to 'estrangement' in his options noted above provide a category of creatures in need of reconciliation that is broader

than sinfulness. Estrangement is more than innocent suffering. It is clear that both human and other-than-human creatures suffer as a result of sinful human cruelty, but such innocent victims are not thereby estranged from God. They require redemption from their suffering, certainly, but not reconciliation. Other creatures, however, could be seen in a different category. For example, Luther judges that the natures of non-human animals were changed by human sin to make some of them vicious and threatening (Luther, vol. 1, 76-7; vol. 2, 74). If this were the case, then wolves and lions, ordered originally to eat only green plants (Gen. 1.30), have, as a result of the Fall, departed from the way God set for them and become dependent on killing other creatures for their food. We might not in this case wish to say that wolves or lions sin in killing for food, but we might say that in this way of life they have become estranged from the God who wished them to live in peace. Wolves and lions might then be judged not as sinful, but as estranged, and so in need of reconciliation in order to participate in the renewed peaceable creaturely relations prophesied by Isaiah (Is. 11.1-9; 65.25).

This consideration of the question of whether non-human animals could be considered sinful, or estranged, from God suggests that Linzey's first option—that only humans require reconciliation—is not an attractive one. Sin and estrangement from God spills out beyond the human realm, and therefore humans are not the only creatures in need of reconciliation by God. The recognition of such sin or estrangement in non-human creatures is compatible with the second option Linzey presents, that in Jesus Christ God acted to bring reconciliation to human beings, and reconciliation of non-human species would require God to assume their nature in other incarnations. This is an unattractive

[top of p. 444]

prospect, however, for a number of reasons. First, it is as strongly at odds with the 'all things' Christological visions of Colossians and Ephesians as the first option that denies the

relevance of reconciliation to non-human creatures. On this account, Jesus Christ reconciles only one kind of thing, and some other saviour is required for the rest. Second, replacing one cosmic incarnation with millions of species-specific ones seems unattractive in its complexity, and difficult conceptually, since species change over time, boundaries between them are fluid, and definitions of the boundaries between species are contested among biologists (Wilkins). The second option of God reconciling non-human creatures through a multitude of species-specific incarnations, therefore, does not commend itself.

While most of this discussion has been in terms of whether atonement and reconciliation relates to non-human animals in addition to human ones, it is important to take one step further and ask whether reconciliation is even more broadly applicable, to all creatures of God, the whole of creation. The Christological visions of Ephesians and Colossians so emphatically specify ‘all things’, that there seems little justification for confining this work of God to animal creatures. The lack of a clear demarcation between animal and non-animal life — sponges and slime moulds are borderline cases — is an additional reason not to put significant theological weight on this boundary line. If ‘all things’ are reconciled in Jesus Christ, we are better off thinking through atonement as God’s reconciliation through Jesus Christ of an estranged creation, including creatures that are human animals, non-human animals, other living creatures such as plants and bacteria, and non-living creatures, such as rivers, rocks and stars. Only such a broad vision can do justice to these comprehensive and cosmic visions of God’s work in Jesus Christ; to attempt to delimit the action of God to any subset of creatures seems very likely to encounter problems parallel to those we have discussed in relation to non-human animals. Clearly, creatures such as mountains and oceans are not in need of forgiveness of the kind of deliberate acts of rebellion that characterize the need of some humans for reconciliation, but rock falls and tsunamis remind us that these inanimate creatures are not always at peace with plant and

animal life, and therefore that the peacemaking between all things effected in Jesus Christ (Col. 1.20) is needed even here.

Extending the reach of the doctrine of the atonement in this way raises a range of other doctrinal questions. If other-than-human creatures are estranged from God, as suggested above, we must reckon with a more-than-human doctrine of the Fall, rather than alternative options either that retain its application to humans alone, or discard it entirely (Clough, 122–127. If Christ's

[top of p. 445]

reconciling work relates to those elected by God, then there are implications for the doctrine of election as well (Clough, chapter 4). If reconciliation leads to redemption, we should give consideration to more-than-human visions of the new creation and the creaturely relations that operate there (Clough, chapters 6-7). The theological reappraisals demanded within these other doctrinal loci illustrate the broad scope of fruitful theological questions provoked by attending to other-than-human animals in relation to the atonement. The alternative course of retaining a human-only account of atonement seems, in contrast, to represent an oddly constricted and over-modest vision of the atoning work of Jesus Christ.

Bibliography

Anselm, 'Cur Deus Homo', in *Anselm: Basic Writings*, Thomas Williams (ed.), (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2007), 237-326.

Aquinas, Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (London: Blackfriars, 1963).

Clough, David, *On Animals: I. Systematic Theology* (London: T & T Clark/Continuum, 2012).

Goodall, Jane, *Beyond Innocence: An Autobiography in Letters: The Later Years*, ed. Dale Peterson (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).

Grumett, David, and Rachel Muers, *Theology on the Menu: Asceticism, Meat and Christian Diet* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2010).

Linzey, Andrew, *Animal Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1994).

Luther, Martin, *Luther's Works*, eds. Helmut T. Lehmann, and Jaroslav Pelikan (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958).

Mascall, E. L., *The Christian Universe* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1966).

Wilkins, John S., *Defining Species: A Sourcebook From Antiquity to Today* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).